

Religion and Culture by Paul Tillich

A digital edition of Paul Tillich's Lecture "Religion and Culture"
Harvard University, 1955-56

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2025

(version: December 20, 2025)

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Lecture XXV, Feb. 9, 1956

We spoke about symbols and characteristics of the representative, in contrast to the non-representative, symbols (the reflective symbols), and also in contrast to the psychological symbols which are actually signs and not symbols – they are, so to speak, symptoms (symptom means sign, not symbol). Therefore we concentrate on the representative symbols. I gave you characteristics of these symbols which appear in language, in history, and in religion, and also in the arts. I didn't speak about the latter ones because they are the subject of today's lecture.

Let us go into the special [sic.] character of the artistic symbols. I had a long time of hesitation before I decided to speak of artistic symbols at all, for the reason which those of you who know a little about history of art will immediately understand. There is such a thing as intentionally symbolic art, for instance produced by the so-called pre-Raphaelites at the end of the 19th century in England. There is symbolistic poetry; there is symbolistic drama, whereby not elements of the ordinary reality are used in order to symbolize something beyond this ordinary reality, but where special symbols are invented which are especially characterized as symbols – angelic figures, forms in which the *non*-realistic element is intentionally expressed. It was always my feeling that such a kind of art is bad art. For this reason I was hesitating to speak in terms of symbols at all, when I spoke of art, but this was a more accidental reason. There was another reason, more substantial, namely the experience that if you are, in a picture or in a piece of music or in a poem or in a drama, participating in its meaning, there is the character which belongs to every symbol – to point beyond [itself – not at all visible. You are in it, but you don't go beyond it. And if you go beyond it to something else, as in symbolistic art, then it is bad art. [307]

This was the second reason. But both reasons fell down in the course of more intensive reflection and of discussions in mutual seminars at Columbia University which I had together with my friend and philosophical critic Jack Randall [John H. Randall, Jr.], whom some of you know. In these discussions, which lasted for several semesters, I finally was convinced that the definition of symbol as I gave it to you last Tuesday (the pointing-beyond-itself, the figurative character, the participation in the power of that which *is* symbolized, the opening up of a reality which otherwise is not opened up but closed, the opening up of levels of the soul) – that all these characteristics also fit the artistic realm, so that my hesitation could be overcome. Now the first argument against

it was easily dismissed simply by saying that if every artistic expression has symbolic character, it is *indeed* bad art to invent special symbols which immediately bring you *out* of the real realm of reality which is the material for every symbolism. So that argument didn't stand. The other argument didn't stand either: if we define sharply what it means, "pointing beyond," "going beyond" – and this analysis I will now give you! [sic.] will start with that art which is more my hobby, the visual arts, and especially painting. I know certainly that this is not the hobby of Americans, especially Protestant Americans, where especially music and poetry are predominant. Nevertheless, just for this reason it is good that I try to use the visual arts as my main |example, and I think you will like it when [308] next week we will show you pictures and their analysis, in terms of the categories which I give you in the lecture itself.

In a picture, let us say a Dutch landscape, which most of you probably know – there you have trees, beautiful old trees, you would like them if you see them in nature – roads, sand, colors, clouds, beautiful sky usually, rivers, old mills, or whatever it may be. But I mean now a *good* picture, by [Jacob van] Ruisdael [1628-1682], or some other great painter. Now what happens if you look at such a picture? Do you say this is a good, desirable place to take a walk? – or as the Americans would say, to drive in and read the New York Times? [laughter]. Or is there something else which is happening? I think if we analyze ourselves, we immediately are clear: there is something else happening. These trees, these greens and grays and browns and blues and forms stand for a level of reality which is opened up by them, by the artistic form which the great artist has given to them, and which without them you wouldn't even find, if there were a photographically very similar landscape somewhere in the world – which is usually not so, but even if it were so. This is the element of pointing-beyond-it. The natural colors and lines which you have even in the most abstract painting, the non-representative painting, still natural colors, our values, our relation to each other, the forms in which they appear, are given to us. They point to a dimension of reality which otherwise is hidden to us and which cannot be reached in any other way than in this way. Now if this is true – and I will carry this through later on in many different respects – then we can say: in every art, the materials taken from the perceived world point beyond themselves, but they do not point to something which is |*outside* of them, but something which is *in* them – and *there* was the [309] reason for my hesitation. Something which in, with, and under the natural forms of the encountered reality: there we encounter something which is not the ordinary encountered reality, but in, with and under the forms and sounds and words and imaginations of the encountered reality, something else appears. Now this is the pointing-beyond. "Beyond" doesn't mean "to something else which could be grasped in another way," but it means "to another dimension which cannot be grasped in *any* other way than through the artistic revelation." Therefore one rightly speaks of the "revelatory" character of great art; if the word revelatory here is removed from its genuinely religious sense and simply means opening up a dimension of reality which is otherwise closed.

When I spoke about symbols generally, I said that this is not only the case with respect to the encountered reality but also with respect to the encountering soul – if you allow me to use this German romantic word "soul," which now must be translated by the word "psychological," although *psychē* originally meant "soul," but since we now have psychology without soul, the word soul cannot be used any more. I *know* ! I mean the total personality in all its different dimensions, levels and functions. And when I mean this – the centered life process, as the word *psychē* originally meant [sic.] meant in Greek – now if I speak about this, then I would say: there are levels or dimensions in our total

being – in our soul, if you allow me that word – which cannot be opened up in any other way than by art. Now everybody would agree with this. Those of you who are musical can easiest agree with me because that which you experience in terms of opening up your souls, in listening to a great work of music [(“great” always means simply “artistic” here) [310] – I don’t want to graduate the artists, but there is so much nonsense or [pomp] in the *so-called* “artistic” realm that I must use an adjective, either “genuine” or “great”, or I should simply say, in an academic lecture, “artistic,” and then the word is really defined. What’s *really* art? If you listen to such a piece of music, something happens to you which is very badly characterized by the word “emotion.” Of course emotion is everywhere, in everything we do, even sometimes when I give a lecture! But emotion in itself is nothing if it is not impregnated with meaning. And it is emotion united with meaning, with the experience of meaning. It is an encounter with one’s own being and the being of one’s world, which happens if you listen to this music. Certainly there is emotion in it, but emotion doesn’t define it.

So we have in the artistic symbols the characteristics of symbol generally. They point beyond themselves, they open up levels of reality which otherwise are closed, they open up levels of the soul which otherwise are not conscious. And also the last point, which I didn’t mention yet: participation in the power of that which they symbolize. I expressed that when I said this realm which is opened up by a landscape of Ruisdael is not something *beside* the painted landscape, but it is in it, with it, and under it; it is inseparably united with it, so that a landscape participates in the power of that which it represents in itself.

Now this has a lot of consequences. The first thing I want to do now is to show you, in the different arts, the symbols which are used, the categories of symbols, not the individual symbols – every color spot in a picture is a symbol in itself in relation to others – but categories of [symbols in the different arts. [311]

I start again with the visual arts. I gave you already one symbol, namely landscapes. Another are faces, the art of the portrait – if it is art and not photography. If it is photography, it falls under other laws, which become more and more difficult, because the artistically inclined photographers try to bring as much artistic elements as possible into the photography. Nevertheless the essential difference is . . . [?] . But the portrait is a symbol. In which sense?

If we look at a portrait, which is a work of art, then it might be very far removed from a photographic or mirror picture of the personality. Nevertheless it can be the symbol for a personal life process which the artist gets out of the totality of the life of this person and the meaning of this life for the person himself and for others, and if it is (now I say) a “great” portrait, for the universe. When we look at a portrait of an old man or woman by Rembrandt, then you have not a photograph of this old man – the greatest of himself in his self-portraits – but you have something quite different: you have the spiritual biography of a human being expressed in his face; and again this not simply in terms of what this biography means for this individual person, but in terms as a representative of a microcosmic embodiment of the universe – in the good Renaissance tradition. In the Renaissance the individual is the microcosm (which means, in English, the “small cosmos”) which mirrors the macrocosm (the universe, the “large cosmos”). In this way these pictures become representative of the universe as such. Now here you have the face of a human being which has its photographic side and which can be photographed and which we encounter in everyday life, always a little bit different, [but so that we [312] always recognize it. And now the artist uses that as his symbol for something far beyond it. The very well known traits of the face now represent something which goes beyond

this moment, beyond *these* lights shining on it, these colors of his or her clothes, *these* surroundings, *this* age – all this is transcended ...

Or human relations can become symbols, human relations painted in terms of couples or groups which are in vital movement, or in intellectual relationship to each other – political, scientific. And there is, going through such a group, a dynamic power which the artist brings out, using the dances or movements or intensities of attention or other relations – love relations – as symbols to express not something which can be defined, but which is in [sic.] and . . . this reality, the vital reality of a group, and this again an expression of the foundations of all reality.

Then in modern non-representative art – cubes, planes, lines, color relationships – without naturalistic contents, which are symbols for those fundamental powers of reality which are, so to speak, the stones of the universe – not in terms of atoms, in scientific consideration, but in terms of power of being, even of that which is not organic and which has *not yet* the form of daily life encounter.

Sometimes – and this is perhaps the most dangerous thing – *events*, because events have the disagreeable character to keep by themselves, and the stories which they tell, a battle or a political scene – as long as they do that, they are not symbols. They become symbols in the moment in which they express a historical event as embodying meaning of existence. And then, even historical scenes can become symbols for something which [313] transcends the immediate situation.

Now this about visual symbols, or symbols in visual arts. Let me also speak of plastic or sculpture, namely bodies, either human bodies or non-representative bodies (you can find them in all modern museums) which do not represent naturalistically any special body (only from very far away), but which represent the standing of the body in space and the infinite possibilities of spatial extension. They are a reality, but they are at the same time something which points beyond the immediately given here. Now you will hear more about this in a little different context later on.

I now come to symbols in poetry. In poetry we have words, but words with their meanings. Now if words communicating meanings are used, then we come immediately to something which must be added, namely in a poetic language, it is not the mere definable meaning which a word has, but it is the mass of connotations which a word always brings with itself. Only in the reflective symbolism of mathematics, mathematical logic, calculating physics, etc., do we have the reduction of symbols to signs, to signs which are everything they are in terms of their definition, and beyond this they are nothing. *Living* language is always more than the immediate meaning of the words. And my main criticism of a philosophy which demands of us to use only words which are as much defined and as exclusively defined as mathematical signs and signs of symbolic logic, [is that it] deprives philosophy of the possibility of mediating an image of reality, which a philosophy always wanted to do. | [314]

Now in poetry the situation is such that the *decisive* things are the connotations. The meaning of the words of course is, so to speak, eternal ... but if a word is used in a poem, all the traditional and emotional connotations which we have in ourselves come into the words, and there they produce the meaning which otherwise cannot be expressed at all. But of course a poem is not a matter of individual words and their connotations. They are connotations mediated also through the *sound* of the words. There is a musical element in all poetry, and therefore poetry originally was sung and not spoken.

There are rhythms, and rhythm is a fundamental revelation of reality. Reality, in our perceiving of it and in its structure, always has a rhythmical character. Without rhythm,

we cannot understand anything. It is an interesting observation that if we go in a railway train and go from one track to the other, all the time, it is always the same, but our ear cannot perceive it as always the same – it makes hexameters or pentameters, but that is not true. The reality is always buh! buh! buh! buh! – but the rhythm which only our ear is able to perceive, makes a rhythm out of it. So in rhythm there is a revelatory character about the reality of the world.

Now if all this is combined in a poem which is a work of art, then we have an encounter with reality in which something is revealed in these three forms (which I discussed last time: the cognitive element, the anticipatory element, and the expressive element) which otherwise cannot be produced at all. In this way the words and sentences, and the connotations and images produced by them in our mind, are symbols for a special encounter with reality. [315]

The third is symbols in drama and novel. Here it is the concentration of figures. Take two of them, the one which all of you know and the other, many of you. The one is Hamlet by Shakespeare, which is a symbol in the genuine sense of artistic symbol. He is described as an individual human being who does these things and those things – he can be psychologized and sociologized, and perhaps even biologized [some laughter] – you can do all this with him. But beyond all this, he points to a level of reality in which we can only participate *through him*. And perhaps this was my very first experience in my life, of art – *real* experience – when I experienced Hamlet as a reality which transcends *any* empirical reality in which I lived, a reality in whom one can participate. And this *participation* in Hamlet was one of the most important encounters with reality I ever had in my life. Now not this individual young man who doesn't know what he shall do and finally succumbs to this indecision, but that for what he stands, all the realities of life which we encounter in encountering him, in which we participate in a new and revelatory way when we participate in him.

Another, Mr. "K" in Kafka's Trial, or Castle. "K" stands for Kafka, of course, but it is not the individual novelist Kafka who has written these two great novels, which I recommend more than anything else in novelistic literature to read, if you want to understand your own deeper levels of life. This man who in The Castle tries to reach the sources of meaning symbolized in a castle which rules the village and the countryside and he never can reach it, he is cut off from it; and ... he becomes guilty without knowing of what, and never knows it, and finally he is executed for a guilt for which he doesn't know, and to which he can never come. Now here we have symbols of a character *which embody in themselves* a reality which transcends by far the description of Mr. "K". And all that happens to him is an expression of our standing in our world, which we can never understand in the same way if we had *not* encountered, in an experience of artistic character, Mr. "K" in Trial and in The Castle. These are dramatic and novelistic symbols. [316]

Symbols in music: Here the emphasis on the emotional is so strong that I have to emphasize a little more than in the others, where I think all of you have followed me comparatively easily, when I speak about this. What happens in music are sounds, movements of our organs of hearing, and the relation of these sounds, the rhythm [sic.] which they appear like in poetry. [sic] What do they do? You already heard from me, and I didn't feel there was any resistance against it, that music opens up the levels of the soul which otherwise are not open at all. But I go beyond this, and I say it is as it is in all symbols: they also open up the levels of reality which otherwise are not manifest. Now this means material reality has in itself the power of sound, and in this power of sound it express something *about itself*. The first theory which was based on this idea was the old

Pythagorean theory of the sounds of the heavenly bodies, usually known as the sounds of the spheres. They discovered the mathematical vibrations which produce sound and their relationships in mathematical proportions. And since they saw the movement of the heavenly bodies, they derived from this the theory that they must produce a sound, and since they are ordered harmoniously, a harmonious sound. They called it the music of the spheres which nobody can hear, because we always hear it, it is always present, and so we cannot hear it as a special thing, but it is something accompanying us, like light or gravitation, or those things which we don't realize any more, but which are there. There is a Psalm in the Old Testament which has a very similar idea, that the heavens and the earth always sing the praise of God by themselves. [317]

Now this means – and that is my emphasis here – that *musicalso* reveals a level of reality which otherwise would be hidden, and not only a level of our soul. One should not put music into the realm of mere subjectivity. The harmonies which are given and which cannot be changed are in nature itself, they are characteristics of vibrating, swinging bodies – you cannot change this. They express something about the nature of our world. These are symbols, therefore, which point to something which also cannot be reached in any other way. Symbols of dance: they combine the musical and the visual. This makes them more than and less than the two others. Combined arts are always more and less at the same time. They cannot use all the possibilities of exclusive arts. But in dance, we have the combination, the expression not of the body, as in sculpture, but of the moving body, and moving only in unity with music. Now here you have a confirmation of what I said that music expresses something about bodies, about the heavenly bodies and all bodies. The selfexpression of dance in moving bodies is in itself a symptom for what I said, and is a symbol of a combined character. I only want to remind, so that you don't need to ask what has that to do with religion, that every liturgy in which the priest moves – and others with him, sometimes – is a cultic dance, is the movement of the body, in which the movement itself expresses something which transcends the simple bodily character of a vital movement. And in coming to the relationship of religion and art later on, we will see that the insight into these relations is a presupposition for a revitalization of liturgical elements on the basis of Protestantism. [318]

Finally I come to *architecture*: Architecture has a very special role, a role which is in some way more important than that of all other arts and in some way less. It is more important because it is completely determined by purpose. Every building [sic.] serves a purpose; therefore an artificial ruin is a horror and not a work of art. And I would say everything in a building which does *not* serve a purpose is a sin against the spirit of a building! Now purpose doesn't mean only heating and water and light and protection against climate, it also means living in it, and all that which makes a house livable also belongs to the purpose. But in doing this, in understanding purpose in such a large way, we also must say that in these creations of man which are determined by purpose, there is also implied the expressive power which we call symbol. One of the great symbols of our time is Rockefeller Center. All those of you who have seen it *should* say that it is an analogy to the Pyramids or other so-called miracles of the world, and understand that here purpose and symbol are in a unique way united, and for this reason – to this I will come next time – I am convinced that church architecture will be the guiding power in the relation of religion and art.